

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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Standing up against imminent death is not the only way to demonstrate one's mettle.



WHAT impressed me primarily about the two of them was the fact that they pointed guns.

Their light dresses were identical in color and style and bore the unmistakable cut of some public institution—possibly the women's state prison. I learned, in due course, that their names were Irene and Hilda.

I had been transplanting tomato seedlings to my garden when I had looked up and there they were.

Irene's hard green eyes flickered over the house, the garage, and the

By Jack Ritchie

small barn. "Where is your car?"

I thought that over for a moment, then said, "I don't have any."

"Then why the garage?" she demanded.

"It came with the property. I haven't had the heart to tear it down." I glanced covertly at my watch. It was a bit after three. "The Swenson farm is just two miles down the road. I'm certain he will lend you one of his vehicles if you are sufficiently persuasive."

She studied the grounds again. "Who lives here besides you?"

"No one," I said firmly.

She turned to Hilda. "Keep an eye on him. I'm going to take a look around."

There seemed to be no point in simply standing there, so I troweled another hole and set down a seedling.

Hilda cleared her throat. "Our car stopped running about three miles back. We tried a lot of other farms while we walked, but the houses were all empty and run down and no windows."

"Abandoned farms," I said. "After their inhabitants mined the last bit of humus from the soil, they departed to devastate other areas."

Hilda could be described as sturdy and she was possibly in her forties. "The land here is kind of hilly and hard to work with machinery. Maybe that's why some of

them left too?" she added smartly.

I conceded the point reluctantly.

"You don't farm real big, do you?" Hilda asked.

"Just five acres and independence." I glanced toward the house. My shotgun lay against the wall of the front closet, but where the devil had I put the shells?

Irene returned. "How do you explain the tire tracks in the driveway?"

"I had a visitor this morning," I said. "My cousin Alfred."

She studied me coldly. "You live all the way out here alone and get along without a car?"

"I am almost entirely self-sufficient and as for the exceptions, I make a monthly phone call to the general store in Haywood and have my order delivered."

"How far is this Haywood?"

"About eight miles."

Hilda smiled diffidently. "I can drive a car real good. I heard once that people like me are the best car drivers in the world because we concentrate on what we're doing and don't get distracted like some people who are real smart or something like that."

I stared at the mild ingenuous blue eyes for a moment and then understood.

I turned to Irene and pointed down the road. "As I mentioned before, there's the Swenson place

just about two miles from here."

Irene glared. "We just came from that direction. There's no live farm for at least three miles."

I sighed. I had assumed that they had come from the north, but evidently they had circled me before making themselves known. There was, of course, no Swenson farm. Momentarily I considered inventing a Lindsey farm to the south, but obviously I would now be met with some skepticism.

Irene cursed softly. "Nothing passed us coming or going. I got the feeling that nobody uses this road."

That, unfortunately, happened to be just about true.

Her eyes suddenly brightened. "He's got a mailbox."

Hilda agreed. "It's just a plain one, but some people have real fancy ones and I heard that it's really against the law to make them fancy but nobody enforces it."

"Listen, dummy," Irene snapped. "I mean this is the country, and in the country the mailman delivers mail by car. So we just wait until he shows up and take his car."

Hilda nodded. "That's right, Irene, but today's a Sunday and they don't deliver on Sundays."

I was a bit curious about Hilda. "Why were you sent to prison?"

"Murder," she said. She looked toward my raspberry patch. "My

mother always made raspberry jam. That was the only thing you could do if you wanted things to keep, but nowadays you can freeze them."

Irene moved her revolver commandingly. "Let's get inside the house."

I preceded them through the rear door into the kitchen.

"My goodness," Hilda said. "It's nice and clean in here. You wouldn't expect that from a man."

"Why not?" I said quickly. "I am by nature a neat man."

Unfortunately, however, the germ of suspicion had been planted in Irene's mind. "I want a tour of the whole house," she said.

Inevitably, I was forced to open the front bedroom on the second floor. Irene's eyes narrowed as she noticed the dressing table. She strode to the closet and opened the door, displaying, of course, the dresses and various things of that nature.

She turned. "You said you lived here alone."

I cleared my throat. "My late wife's room. She died a year ago. I've left her room exactly as it was the day she died."

"Except that you dusted," Hilda said.

I nodded. "Except that I dusted." Now I recalled where I kept the shotgun shells—on the top shelf in

the pantry. "Personally," I said, "I'm rather hungry and I usually have some kind of snack at about this time."

The idea of food seemed acceptable to both of them and we descended once again to the kitchen.

I entered the pantry, letting the door appear to drift almost shut behind me as I continued talking. "Do you prefer coffee or tea?"

I used the step-stool and quickly reached up into the cardboard shell box. I stuffed four 16-gauge shells in my pocket and descended. "Sugar?"

I brought out the cups and saucers and proceeded to set up the pot of coffee. I glanced at the wall clock. Three-twenty. I would have to get rid of them by four.

I put coffee cake on the table.

"That looks nice," Hilda said. "You can see it's homemade. I guess you baked it yourself?"

For a moment I thought my only recourse would be to say yes and hope for the best, but inspiration intervened. "No," I said. "My cousin Alfred brought it when he visited this morning. His wife has quite a reputation for coffee cake." I quickly cut a few slices and changed the subject. "Were you in prison long, Hilda?"

"Twenty-six years," she said. "Ever since I was sixteen. I was sentenced to life."

I turned on the gas under the coffeepot. "I know they are generally referred to as 'life' sentences, but weren't you eligible for parole after twelve years or so?"

She finished a bite of coffee cake. "Yes, but I turned it down. I think that made a lot of trouble and it never happened before because they had to look up laws and things, and they discovered that they couldn't parole me unless I agreed, and I wouldn't."

I fastened on the incongruity. "You wouldn't accept a parole and yet when the opportunity to escape presented itself, you grasped it?"

She nodded. "Prison isn't too bad for somebody like me, except that they really ought to give you about two weeks vacation a year. To get out and see the new things, you know?" She smiled. "If I accepted the parole, the only way I could get back after seeing things would be to violate the parole by murdering somebody again or doing something else bad. And I wouldn't want to do that again unless I knew something about the person and he deserved it. But suppose I couldn't find anybody bad? I'd be stuck outside forever."

I was still pondering the logic of that when the coffee finished perking.

"Irene might be a murderer too," Hilda said.

"Might be?" I glanced at Irene.

"I mean that she and her boyfriend were running away after robbing a bank and they happened to come on this cabin in the woods where two hunters were staying. So they took over, and when they left they killed both the hunters so they wouldn't be able to tell the police that they'd been there."

Just the trace of a smile appeared on Irene's lips, but she said nothing.

"And when Irene and her boyfriend were caught she said her boyfriend did the killings and he said that she was the one who did it. Nobody knew who to believe, so they were both sent to jail for life. She and her boyfriend don't even write to each other now."

I met Irene's eyes for a moment and had the distinct impression that her boyfriend had been the victim of a miscarriage of justice.

Until now, my primary interest in getting them off my property had been to prevent them from stealing my car—when it returned at four—but I could see there was probably a good deal more at stake than the fate of an automobile.

"How come you're not wearing a wedding ring?" Irene suddenly demanded.

I looked at my hand.

"I guess that's because he doesn't believe in being sentimental," Hilda

said, "about what's done is done, and she's dead."

"Don't be an idiot," Irene snapped. "If he's sentimental enough to keep her room intact, why wouldn't he wear the ring?"

I was about to say that some men do not believe in wearing wedding rings, but Hilda spoke first.

"Maybe he put it in the casket when they buried her. Sometimes bereaved people do that."

I thought I'd settle for that. "Yes," I said, "I left it in the casket."

Hilda sipped her coffee. "What are we going to do now, Irene?"

"We stay overnight," Irene said. "In the morning when the mailman shows up, we'll be waiting with sweet smiles."

Hilda agreed. "Then we lock up the mailman and this man in the basement or something and tear out the telephone wires and we'll be ten or twenty miles away before they get out and tell the police about us."

Irene smiled secretly once again. "Yeah, I guess we'll do something like that."

I now had the shells in my pocket and the shotgun waited in the closet. There remained only the marriage of the two.

I collected the cups and saucers and placed them in the sink. "Are there any objections if I go out-

doors and finish my transplanting?"

Irene shrugged. "I don't give a damn. Hilda, you stay with him, and don't let him pull any tricks."

"Don't worry," Hilda said. "I keep my mind on things, and I'll guard him real good."

"It seems to be getting a little chilly outside," I said. "I'll need a light jacket."

Hilda followed me to the front closet.

What exactly would I do next? Step into the rather large closet and let the door swing shut behind me, as I had done in the pantry? Then, while momentarily eclipsed from Hilda's view, seize the shotgun and slip in two shells?

And then what? Should I kick open the door and blast away?

I sighed. I did not think I was quite capable of anything that aggressive and cold-blooded, but at least I could go through the motions.

"The jacket is hanging on a hook in the back of the closet," I said. I opened the door and stepped inside.

As the door coasted to the closed position, I was in momentary darkness. I felt about and my hand immediately closed on the weapon. I quickly slipped two shells into the chambers and then took a deep breath.

I reopened the door. "Drop your gun, Hilda," I said firmly, but not so loud as to alert Irene in the kitchen.

Hilda frowned in concentration, and then after a very long fifteen seconds she shook her head. "No. I couldn't do that. I promised Irene."



"Hilda," I said warningly, "are you aware of what a double-barreled shotgun can do to a human being?"

She nodded. "That's how I killed my stepfather when I was sixteen. Because he kicked down the fence around my garden and he always claimed it was an acci-

dent. Only I waited and watched and saw that it wasn't an accident at all. He did it on purpose. It's very messy, but I still can't give you the gun."

I looked up at the ceiling.

"Besides," Hilda said, "if you shoot me my finger will probably twitch or something and you'll get shot too. So I think it's much better if you put your gun away. Should I count to ten?"

"Never mind," I said stiffly. I broke open the shotgun and removed the shells. I put the gun back into the closet and closed the door.

"You forgot your jacket," Hilda said.

As we passed Irene in the kitchen, she looked up from the magazine she'd found. "What were you two talking about?"

"Nothing much," Hilda said.

In the garden I picked up my trowel and went back to work. "How long do you intend to remain in the outside world this time? Two weeks?"

"No," Hilda said. "I guess I'll go back pretty soon. I didn't bring any money with me. Usually I do and I always walked off alone before, but this was a sort of spur of the moment thing. I don't think I'll do that again. I mean without planning and having the right clothes."

"How do you manage to get money in the first place?"

"I usually do sewing and crocheting for the matrons. A lot of them are grandmothers, you know, and very busy, but they still feel guilty about not crocheting or knitting or doing something useful, so they get me to crochet for them and they tell their grandchildren they did it themselves, and they always give me money."

"What happens when you go back? Do they put you in solitary?"

She smiled quietly. "Goodness no. That's just for the mean ones. The warden—he's such a nice man—talks to me and tries to make me take the parole and leave. But when I set my mind to it, I'm firm and I always say no, even when he said they wouldn't let me use any of the sewing machines. But that lasted only a week. When he saw he wasn't getting anywhere, he gave up, and I made his daughter a Communion dress."

"In other words, you could take the parole and leave prison any time you want to?"

She nodded. "I guess that's it."

An idea was beginning to form in my mind. "Do you really like it in there?"

There was a pause and then she said, "It's the only place I have. Or people. But still, sometimes I

get lonely." She sighed morosely.

"You get lonely with so many people around you?"

"They all try to be nice to me, but there's no one for me to talk to. Like a personal friend. Someone who would understand what I'm saying and never get impatient if I'm too slow. You know what I mean?"

"Yes," I said, "I do."

Irene came out of the house. "We'll be moving in fifteen minutes."

"Oh?" Hilda said.

Irene showed white teeth. "I paged through the telephone directory and it turns out that Haywood happens to have a one-man taxi service. So I phoned and he'll be out to pick us up in fifteen minutes." Her eyes narrowed. "Let's get him out of sight." Her gun indicated a direction and I moved that way.

Behind the barn, Irene said, "This is far enough."

"I'll look for some rope," Hilda said, "and we'll tie him up."

But Irene had no such ideas. Her eyes gleamed. "Don't waste your time, Hilda."

Hilda blinked. "You're going to shoot him?"

"I can't think of anything safer for us than a dead man." She leveled the gun.

I closed my eyes.

Then there was one single shot.

After a few moments I was more than just curious as to why I still remained standing. I opened my eyes again.

Irene lay at my feet and it was evident that she was quite dead.

Hilda shook her head sadly. "You know, I think she was the one who really killed those hunters." She smiled quietly. "It's one thing to kill someone who's mean, but it's another thing to kill somebody who's innocent, and so I couldn't let her shoot you." She put the gun aside and it was evident that I was no longer a prisoner or a hostage.

I took a deep breath and then went to the garage. I selected a shovel from the rack.

Hilda had followed me. "What are you doing?"

I returned to Irene's body, surveyed the slope behind the barn, and selected a spot. "I'm going to bury Irene. Nobody need ever know she's been here. When Fred's taxi shows up, you keep out of sight. I'll tell him he's got the wrong place."

Hilda frowned. "I don't understand."

"Hilda," I said gently, "there's no telling exactly how the authorities will react, but I strongly suspect they will see to it that you are *never* released from prison if ever

they learn you killed Irene. Even if it was to save my life."

She spoke patiently. "But I don't want to be released. Don't you remember I told you that?"

"Yes, I remember. But what I'm trying to say is that you may stay here if you want to."

She stared at me and then slowly shook her head. "No. I know you'd try to be very kind, but I could tell when you're irritated and there's nothing I could do to change because I am just what I am. It wouldn't work out."

"You still don't understand, Hilda," I said. "I mean I think you would like—"

And then I heard the car. I walked around to the front of the barn and looked up the hill road. Yes, there it was, exactly on time.

Hilda stood beside me. "Fred's taxi?"

"No."

The ten-year-old sedan slowed as it approached the driveway and the left turn blinker flashed on. It turned carefully into the long driveway and pulled to a stop before the garage.

"Your wife?" Hilda asked. "She's really alive?"

"No," I said. "I've never been married."

Ellie got out of the car and smiled. "I didn't have any accident or anything at all, Andrew, and I kept the speed limit and I met Constable Richards and he said that I was still the best driver in the whole county." Her mild, mild blue eyes rested on Hilda. "I visited with Aunt Martha until exactly three-fifteen like Andrew told me and then I said I had a very nice time and I left. We talked mostly about the weather and wasn't it a shame that the elm trees were dying."

"Hilda," I said, "This is my sister, Ellie."

Hilda had been staring as Ellie spoke. Now she turned to me and she understood. Slowly she nodded. "If it's all right with you, Andrew, I think I'll stay and help Ellie fix supper."

I watched them walk toward the house, side by side, and then I went back to my shovel and the job I had to do.

